Ten Tips: Cafeteria Recycling

1. **Request support and assistance from principal/administrator**
   - The principal or a key administrator is supportive of the cafeteria recycling program and conveys the importance of recycling to students and staff.
   - Principal or key administrator clearly communicates his/her expectations of the head building engineer, custodial staff, kitchen manager, and other staff assigned to lunch room regarding how they should assist with the cafeteria recycling program.

2. **Get the head building engineer and custodians involved**
   - The head building engineer and his/her custodial staff should monitor the recycling in the cafeteria and the kitchen, and take full bags of recyclables to the recycling dumpster.
   - In some schools, the head building engineer and/or custodians help direct students near the recycling station so they know which items can be recycled.

3. **Have lunch room staff and/or responsible students help near the recycling station**
   - In elementary schools, paraprofessionals typically help guide students near the recycling station. Either a paraprofessional is posted at each recycling station or he/she is responsible for a specific class or table. Some schools have older students “coach” younger students.
   - In middle and high schools, a teacher or staff member who is assigned to the lunch period can stand by the tray return area and direct and encourage students to recycle.
   - Responsible students can also be asked to stand at the recycling station and help direct other students. These students can be part of a club or program that regularly assist with cafeteria recycling or help just during the first few weeks of each semester, such as the environmental club or green team, service learning, work study, student council, etc.

4. **Place distinctive recycling containers in ideal location(s) and use signage**
   - It’s important that the recycling bins are located right next to trash containers. Depending on the preferences and size of the school, there may just be one or two recycling stations where all the students go (e.g., tray return area). Or, there may be several recycling stations dispersed throughout the cafeteria.
   - Recycling containers should also look different from trash cans. Schools can purchase new recycling bins or they can repurpose old trash cans to serve as recycling containers. To make them more eye-catching, most schools paint distinctive designs on the repurposed containers and place lids on them with a large hole cut in the top to make it obvious they are for recycling (see examples on the last page of this document).
   - Laminated signage should ideally be attached to the lid of the recycling container or located right above it on the wall. Digital files for recycling signage can be obtained on the OPS Green Schools Initiative website.
5. Establish a specific process for dumping excess liquids

- The suggested approach is for students to dump out extra juice and milk in the trash before placing the empty container in the recycling bin. Typically, the trash cans are double bagged; however, a single bag is sufficient. OPS custodians do not report any leaking problems with this approach to handling excess liquids.

- Some schools demonstrate a different approach, which entails students pouring excess liquids into dump buckets before placing the empty container in the recycling bin. If a school prefers this option, the head building engineer or custodian typically empties the bucket into a kitchen drain and runs water after dumping the liquid to prevent odor issues.

6. Educate students and model recycling procedures

- Educating students about which items are recyclable and also modeling how to dump excess milk/juice in the trash and how to place all recyclables in the same container can be very beneficial. OPS schools can produce and show brief recycling videos when the program is first launched and at the beginning of each semester as a refresher.

- Many schools also provide regular announcements about the cafeteria recycling program and have student clubs go around to each homeroom to provide education about the proper recycling procedures in the cafeteria and which items are recyclable. To view cafeteria recycling videos from other schools and/or to read about recommended content to include in a school-produced video, go to the GSI website.

7. Provide feedback and recognition

- On a regular basis, it is beneficial to report back to students and staff about the success of the school’s program and how much recycling is being diverted from the landfill.

8. Pilot the program

- Some schools test out a new cafeteria recycling program with a specific lunch section first before rolling it out to all of the lunch sections. This way the school can identify any small problems or needed changes before opening up the program to the entire school.

9. Encourage kitchen staff to recycle

- In addition to recycling in the cafeteria, it is beneficial to have kitchen staff recycle cardboard boxes, cans, and plastic containers produced from preparing meals.

- Kitchen staff only need to quickly rinse cans or plastic containers that have sticky or heavy food residue in them, such as pasta sauce. If the container does not have sticky residue it can be placed in the recycling container without being rinsed.

Additional Suggestion for Elementary Schools: Tray Stacking

Elementary schools are also encouraged to have students stack their empty, disposable trays on a cart lined with an inverted bag, which is located next to the recycling station. The head building engineer or paraprofessional then places the pile of trays in the trash can when the stack gets too high. Stacking trays dramatically reduces the number of bags that need to be pulled from the cafeteria because more trays can go in a bag. This results in less work for the head building engineer and a reduction in the number of times the trash dumpster has to be hauled away per week, which saves the school money. For a visual demonstration of this tray stacking system, see the photos on the following page.
Repurposed (painted) trash can used as a cafeteria recycling container, which includes laminated signage attached to a bright colored lid with a hole cut in the center.

A new (purchased) cafeteria recycling container, which includes laminated signage attached to a bright colored lid with a hole cut in the center.

Disposable tray stacking system with an inverted trash bag placed over the cart, which keeps it clean and makes it easy to dispose of the stack.

Disposable tray stacking system with a thin plastic sheet used to cover the cart.